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Busch appoints 6 to panel probing Ehrlich firings

Bipartisan committee to assess personnel changes made after governor elected

By Tom Stuckey
The Associated Press

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House Speaker Michael Busch today appointed a committee of four Democrats and two Republicans to join six state senators in an inquiry into the personnel policies of the Ehrlich administration.

Democratic legislative leaders agreed last month to create a special committee to probe allegations that the rights of career civil servants were violated when they were summarily fired after Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. was elected in 2002.

While aides to Ehrlich and Republican lawmakers said they fear the investigation will turn into a witch hunt, Busch and Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller promised a bipartisan inquiry that will focus on the rights of career civil servants and whether laws dealing with employees in nonpolitical jobs need to be strengthened.

Busch had earlier announced two of the six House members -- House Speaker Pro Tem Adrienne Jones, a Democrat from Baltimore County, and Republican Minority Leader George Edwards of Garrett County.

The speaker said today that he added Republican Jean Cryor of Montgomery County in part so there would be one Republican from a suburban district to go along with Edwards and the two Senate GOP members, Minority Leader J. Lowell Stoltzfus of Somerset County and John Hafer of Allegany County, all of whom are from rural areas.

The new Democratic members are Maggie McIntosh of Baltimore, Anthony Brown of Prince George's County and Galen Claggett of Frederick County.

"I think its a good cross-section. I think they will take the issue seriously," Busch said.

He said he wants a fair assessment of whether there was anything illegal or unethical in the way some employees were fired and whether any changes are needed in the law to protect workers who are performing well in jobs that should not be subject to political pressure.

Democrats have not challenged the great majority of the personnel changes made by Ehrlich after he took office, saying he has the right to put his own people into top administrative and policy-making positions.

But Busch said today that the governor went beyond that in some cases, especially by firing or trying to fire longtime employees in agencies that have traditionally been considered independent bodies, such as the Maryland Insurance Administration and the Public Service Commission.

Ehrlich aides deny those allegations, saying more career employees were replaced by former Democratic Gov. Parris Glendening than by Ehrlich.

Henry Fawell, an Ehrlich spokesman, said today the administration "is eager to work with the committee," but said the governor had no comment on the new members named by Busch.

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